



Republican Policy Committee

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Wisconsin's Waiver: Willie or Won't He?

Classic Clinton Waffle on Welfare Reform: Will the Real Bill Clinton Please Stand Up?

"Ending welfare as we know it..." Along with *"It's the economy, stupid,"* then-candidate Clinton's promise to completely overhaul a failed welfare system became one of the best-remembered sound bites of the 1992 campaign.

But, here we are, almost four years later, and what has Bill Clinton delivered in the way of welfare reform? Nothing. During the first two years of his administration, when both houses of Congress were controlled by his party, he sent up to Congress a welfare bill that was so bad — extending rather than curtailing access to welfare benefits, and costing more money to boot — that it was unable to make it out of committee in either the Senate or the House.

Then, after the 1994 election, the new Congressional leadership *twice* sent to President Clinton's desk bills which, if enacted, would have allowed him the rare pleasure of having kept a campaign promise. Instead, on both occasions, he *vetoed* legislation that would have:

- Ended welfare's 60-year entitlement status
- Imposed a five-year lifetime limit on receiving welfare benefits
- Required welfare recipients to work for their benefits when "work ready" or after two years, at the latest
- Reduced or terminated benefits for recipients who refuse to work
- Allowed states to withhold more money from welfare moms who have more children
- Required unmarried teenage mothers to stay at home and stay in school
- Consolidated dozens of Washington programs and dramatically reduced the welfare bureaucracy
- Required welfare recipients to establish paternity, and then get tough on deadbeat dads who have failed to keep up with child support payments
- Guaranteed that noncitizens do not become wards of the state
- Saved taxpayers \$60 billion over seven years.

(For more details on the Clinton meanderings on welfare reform, see RPC's "Going Back on His Word: President Clinton's Welfare Promises, Welfare Veto," 1/22/96)

Now, as Congress prepares to send another welfare reform bill (the Senate bill is S. 1956, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act) to the White House, the same old

Clinton bob-and-weave, bait-and-switch gyrations have begun. Speaking on television on July 15, and to the National Governors Association (NGA) the next day, President Clinton offered warm fuzzies about S. 1956, a bill very similar to the two he vetoed. On the other hand, Senate Minority Leader Daschle, shortly after a meeting with the president, described him as "more resolute" than he expected him to be about vetoing welfare reform yet again.

The Wisconsin Waffle

Whether or not President Clinton signs or vetoes welfare reform at this point is anybody's guess. However, the *prospect* of a comprehensive reform bill has had one undeniable benefit for the White House: it has served as cover for unconscionably dragging out action on the state of Wisconsin's application for a waiver, which would authorize replacement of a federally-managed system with a flexible, state-run program designed to get people off welfare and into jobs.

First, a little background. While comprehensive, national welfare reform languished, the White House at least indicated its willingness to allow states to begin their own reform efforts. In particular, President Clinton, speaking to last year's NGA conference, promised to act on such waivers within 30 days. Instead (as Bob Dole pointed out to the assembled governors at *this* year's conference), the average waiver takes about 210 days, and some have taken 400 days!

Wisconsin submitted a waiver application for its plan, "Wisconsin Works," on May 29, 1996. Just a few days earlier, in his weekly radio address of May 18, President Clinton had said:

"Wisconsin has the making of a solid, bold welfare reform plan. We should get it done. I pledge that my administration will work with Wisconsin to make an effective transition to a new vision of welfare . . ."

So, here we are, well over the 30-day pledge period, and a waiver is nowhere in sight. Incredibly, even as President Clinton sat on Wisconsin's waiver, he took the NGA meeting as a convenient opportunity to dust off his 1992 stump speech, once again praising Wisconsin's "bold plan to reform welfare" — a plan which can't go into effect because he hasn't granted the waiver! Maybe "*Bill Clinton, 'Wisconsin Works' Cheerleader*" needs to be introduced to "*Bill Clinton, Wisconsin Waiver-withholder*." After listening to the Clinton remarks, Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson said:

"Our heads are spinning. One day he is for waivers, the next day he is promoting a bill, even though he has twice vetoed welfare reform bills."
[Associated Press, 7/16/96]

In short, identifying the real Bill Clinton on welfare reform is like trying to keep track of the attendees at an Elvis impersonators' convention. What will he do next: Wisconsin waiver, comprehensive bill — he doesn't know! And neither does anybody else.

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